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A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT THE

Parish Church of *Chelmsford*,

On MARCH 1, 1769,

AT THE

L E N T A S S I Z E S,

B E F O R E

The Hon. Sir S. S. SMYTHE, Knt.

One of the Barons of the Court of Exchequer.

Published at the REQUEST of the HIGH SHERIFF and the
GENTLEMEN of the GRAND JURY.

By the Rev. JOHN COTT, B.D. *K*

Rector of Great Braxted, and Vicar of Coggeshall in Essex.

L O N D O N;

Printed for H. GARDNER, opposite St. Clement's Church in the Strand
and sold by W. TOFT and L. HASSELL, Bookfellers at Chelmsford.

M.DCC.LXIX.

SAFETY MATTHEW N.
 HIGH SHERIFF OF THE COUNTY OF LONDON
 PREACHED AT THE

Parish Church of Chelmsford

GRANTON MARSH (1800) GRAND JURY

ALL THE
 L E W I S
 COURSE


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 One of the Barons of the Court of Exchequer.

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T O

DANIEL MATHEW, Esq;

HIGH SHERIFF of the County of ESSEX,

AND TO THE

GENTLEMEN OF THE GRAND JURY,

THIS DISCOURSE

PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS

WITH RESPECT AND HUMILITY,

INSCRIBED

DANIEL MATTHEW, Esq.

High Sheriff of the County of Essex

AND TO THE

GENTLEMEN OF THE GRAND JURY

THIS COURSE



PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST

WITH RESPECT AND HUMILITY

INScribed

The strength and security which religion in general affords will be evinced by considering how the human authority is capable of answering the ends and purposes of civil government.

PROVERBS XIV. *part of the 26th verse.*

In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence.

THE being of a God, the certainty of his providence, and a state of retribution, were the first doctrines taught to civilize mankind, and form them into societies; and when formed, a practice suitable to these principles was recommended and enforced; as the surest basis of public welfare,

The wisdom of this policy is confirmed by Solomon in the text:—*In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence*; or in other words, the fear of the Lord is that principle, which gives stability and success to government, confidence and security to the governed.

It shall be the business of this discourse to shew what strength and confidence religion in general affords to civil society.

Secondly, How much this influence is increased under the Christian dispensation; and from hence infer,

Thirdly, The great and necessary duty of the magistrate to support it.

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The strength and security religion in general affords, will be evinced by considering how far human authority is capable of answering the ends and purposes of civil government.

The great end of civil society is the security of its members:—It is formed to support the weak against the strong, the simple against the designing, the oppressed against the oppressor.—To this purpose laws are enacted, which the Scripture tells us “*are for a terror to those who do evil.*”

But human laws, however wisely and well instituted, or prudently and vigorously executed, extend their influence but a little way, and are found unequal to the end designed, the public peace and safety. They extend at farthest to outward acts, and therefore can restrain only open injuries and public offences; whilst an inconceivable variety of actions, equally injurious to the peace and good order of society, either lying concealed from the eye of the magistrate, or falling without the letter of the law, cannot be restrained. Laws calculated for the most important purposes, not only thus lose their effect, but in many cases are perverted to real grievances: and though the unwary and less guilty offender may suffer the punishment due to his crimes, the artful and more dangerous criminal too often escapes, and continues to disturb the peace of society, and insult the weakness of human authority. Some assistance, therefore, is necessary to be given to human authority, that may oblige mankind to those acts of justice, and that tenderness to the peace of society, to which the power of the magistrate is unequal, and this assistance religion affords.

For

For though the influence of human authority is weak and limited, the religious principle is powerful and universal. Where a due fear of God is impressed on the minds of a people, the defect of human laws is sufficiently supplied. An awful sense of that Being, whose power is unlimited, and whose knowledge is universal, must equally influence their conduct in all seasons, and upon all occasions. They will reason with the Psalmist, and say,—*Whither shall I go from God's spirit, and whither shall I fly from his presence: he is about my path, and about my bed, and spieth out all my ways.* And without this sense of a divine presence and providence, how weak and insignificant will the invocation of God be by an oath, which is considered the greatest security that can be given to society! It is this security which the magistrate gives to execute the laws with justice and equity.—It is by this the subject is considered as most strongly bound to obedience and duty, and on this security depend the lives and properties of individuals: but if the fear of God cease to influence the mind, the security is nothing; if it be weakened, the stability of government, and the confidence and the security of the public, will in the same degree be weakened too: But where it prevails in the minds of the people in general, there, says Solomon, is a strong confidence.

But secondly, The fear of God gives stability to civil society, by enforcing the duties of benevolence and public virtue, to which human authority does not extend.

The rights of strict justice, as far as the knowledge and power of the magistrate extend, may be enforced. They are duties of perfect obligation, and are equally binding at all times, and on every individual: but in order to promote the public happiness, society has a claim on its members, not only to the duties of legal justice, but the generous and more noble virtues of benevolence and a public spirit. These are reciprocal duties for that security and happiness government affords, and without the practice of these virtues, though the existence of a nation may be continued, yet its prosperity and happiness cannot.

But however just these claims may be, and however necessary these duties are to public welfare, yet they are such, which human authority cannot enforce: they are duties of imperfect obligation, and consequently the rights of the public cannot be vindicated: For what degree of benevolence and public spirit is due from any individual, depends on a variety of particulars, which as they cannot be precisely ascertained, cannot legally be demanded; but much must be left to every man's conscience, that is, to the direction of the religious principle, which alone can enforce the practice of these duties.

It is said, indeed, that the principle of honour tends to answer this end, and supply this defect of human laws. If by a principle of honour be meant a nice sense of duty, flowing from that relation man bears to society, and animated by a love of his fellow creatures, it differs not from the religious principle: but if by honour be meant any principle

principle separate from piety and virtue, it must be founded on passion, and therefore no proper foundation of public security. As flowing from passion, it may be over-ruled by the bias of opposite passions; and as popular favour is generally its object, it may be made subservient to the worst measures. Unstable as the stream on which it flows, it is carried as chance or the blast of folly shall please to direct it. But he whose principle of acting is a sense of his duty, and whose great end is the approbation of his Maker, will in all his actions be generous and consistent. He will consider the public and his private happiness as inseparably connected; and that his zeal for the public service will not only be attended with the esteem of his fellow creatures, but approved and rewarded by that being, whom he adores and fears.—Thus I have considered how far religion in general contributes to the stability and confidence of any people. I am next to consider how superior this influence is under the Christian dispensation.—As a sense of a Divine Providence and a future retribution are the two principles, which, at all times, have been considered as essentially necessary to the support of government, it follows, that the more evident and certain these doctrines are under any institution of religion, the greater will their influence be.

In order to shew the superior influence of the Christian dispensation relative to these doctrines, it may not be improper to consider what evidence mankind had of them before the coming of Christ.

A sense of Divine Providence, and a future retribution, were indeed inculcated in the Heathen world by its several legis-

legislators; but the bulk of the people received them solely on their authority. They, indeed, who had leisure to examine these doctrines endeavoured to satisfy themselves of their truth on principles of reason. They inferred from the visible creation the necessity of some Supreme first cause, and from the due order and harmony of the system a Divine Power superintending it. But whether this Supreme Author and Governor of the world would condescend to regard the actions of his creatures, and accordingly to reward or punish them, was beyond the power of reason with certainty to determine. On either supposition difficulties occurred, and the reasonings on this subject of the wisest men in the Heathen world, are full either of doubt or contradiction.

Though these doctrines then were inculcated, and being generally believed, had great influence, yet as they were ignorant of their divine authority, and unable to attain a rational and certain conviction, the influence of these principles was necessarily defective, and a superior evidence was wanting to perfect them for society.

Under the Jewish dispensation one of these doctrines, a sense of Divine Providence, was abundantly clear; but the certainty of a future retribution seems not to have been so universally well understood: for tho' promises of it were given and understood by the Patriarchs and the Prophets, yet the declarations of it were few and not express; and whether the law of Moses was founded on temporal sanctions, or on those also that are eternal, yet we find from the history of that people, that their obedience was founded
on.

on the hope of an earthly Canaan, not a heavenly one; and consequently, as this motive was weaker, its influence was less.

But under the Christian dispensation all doubts and difficulties relative to these doctrines, which are essentially necessary to civil society, are effectually removed.— It clearly and expressly informs us, under the authority of God, evidenced by miracles and the spirit of prophecy, of his particular providence, the soul's immortality, a day of judgment, and a future retribution: the motives to obedience, and a due discharge of our respective duties, are founded now on our love to God, as well as our fear of him.— In short, whatever influence these doctrines were capable of under any former institution, their authority under the Christian must be greatly increased, as its evidence is certain and its sanctions are infinite.

But not only the doctrines of Christianity tend to the stability and prosperity of civil government, but its precepts also are admirably calculated to the peace and security of it.

It effectually tends to the good order of society, by enjoining the duties of patience and moderation, of humility and the forgiving of injuries. It provides for the security of it, by restraining, not only every unjust action, but every criminal and dishonest intention; not only to do no evil, but to think none, and to abstain from every appearance of it. It provides for the happiness of its members, by recommending and enjoining a most diffusive and exalted charity; a charity which influences the heart at all seasons, and

and towards every character, to enemies as well as friends. — It provides for the public happiness by rooting out that inordinate self-love, that sacrifices the peace and honour of the whole to the interest, exaltation, and pleasure of itself. — It supports the soul in adversity, and keeps it humble in prosperity: it arms it against the fear of death on the most rational considerations; and by that means preserves it from every action that may be dangerous to the public, or ignominious to itself.

Such is the tendency of that religion we profess to the stability and happiness of society; and did a fear of God preserve a reverence to its doctrines, and obedience to its precepts, these blessings would be experienced, and supply all the defects that are incident to human laws: — that these blessings are not experienced in that full and compleat manner which every good man might expect, under a constitution the boast of our own country, and the envy of every other, can be resolved only into the decay of the religious principle.

That ease and affluence which we, unknown to former ages, have enjoyed by the goodness of God, have almost destroyed our fear of him; and those blessings which his providence has given to strengthen the hands of government, have been used only as instruments to weaken and overturn it. — In our prosperity we have forgot God, and in consequence of that we are delivered over a prey to the violence of unrestrained passions. Hence that unbounded spirit of licentiousness, the characteristick of the present times, that impatience of all government, that confusion of ranks,

ranks, that precipitancy to anarchy. Instead of obedience to law, the art only is studied of eluding it : instead of that respect, for conscience sake, which is due to our governors, the method only of insulting them with impunity is considered ; instead of that calm zeal, and candid allowance to men and measures, which a fear of God and a true spirit of patriotism would inspire, every scheme is practised to perplex government ; every opportunity taken, not to amend, but to expose and aggravate the mistakes of its ministers ; every delusion is played off to inflame the minds of the people.

This surely is a season in which no good man can be unconcerned. As the root of this evil is a licentiousness of manners, arising from a decay of the religious principle, the morals of the people must first be reformed, an awful sense of the divine authority revived, before stability can be restored to government, or confidence to the public.

As the interests, therefore, of religion and civil government are so intimately and inseparably connected, how much is it the duty of those in the superior rank of life, on whose character the morals of the people in a great measure depend, to lead the way ; — to uphold by their example and influence, the authority of those principles of religion on which the security of national happiness depends !

The vigilance of the magistracy in the execution of the laws, against every instance of profaneness, is now especially
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necessary, as many late instances afford melancholy proofs how little influence the fear of God has, even in the most solemn invocation of his sacred name, and when the interest of the public was immediately concerned.

And here let it not be thought too presuming, if I add, that the frequent use of an oath, and the hasty manner in which it is administered in general, have a fatal tendency to abate that awful sense of God, which should ever be impressed upon the minds of those who are called upon to take it.—It is to be feared, that it is considered by many as a matter of mere form, rather than a solemn appeal to the supreme Being; and that this appeal is sometimes made, when even the matter of the testimony is not understood by him who gives it. Whereas was this appeal, by the solemnity of an oath, confined only to matters of the most necessary kind; and when offered, explained, and administered in the most solemn manner, and in a way most likely to affect the person who takes it, such a sense of God would probably be impressed, as might have the happiest effect, not only in particular cases, but universally.

Last of all—As every individual is interested, though in different degrees, in the public welfare, so it is their duty, as well as their interest, to preserve and advance it.—The happiness of the whole body must be made up by the religion and virtue of its members:—Let us, therefore, as far as our examples and abilities reach, contribute our shares to the stock of national religion and happiness:—
that

that by so doing we may shew ourselves true patriots, conscientious friends to the liberty and prosperity of our country, and approve ourselves loyal and grateful subjects to our Sovereign, whose exemplary piety, and real virtue, is our chief confidence; — and that after enjoying the reward of our righteousness here, in the prosperity of our country, we may be admitted hereafter, through the mercy of Christ, into a state of happiness infinite and eternal.

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